



Report on the preliminary results of „Proyecto Ognorhynchus“ for the conservation of the Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* in Colombia

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Erste Ergebnisse des „Proyecto Ognorhynchus“ zum Schutz des Gelbohrsittichs *Ognorhynchus icterotis* in Kolumbien

Nach der (seit 1989 ersten) Sichtung eines kleinen Gelbohrsittichschwarmes in Bereich der kolumbianischen Zentralkordillere im Oktober 1997 wurde im Juni 1998 eine gezielte Nachsuche nach dieser höchstbedrohten Art eingeleitet. Es wird vermutet, daß die Art noch in kleinen Stückzahlen in einem etwa 50 Quadratkilometer großen Gebiet im Department Tolima vorkommt, wo sich ihr Verbreitungsgebiet möglicherweise mit dem der Waxpalme *Ceroxylon quindiuense* deckt. In der ersten Projektphase konnte kein Brutnachweis für die nomadische Art in dem Gebiet erbracht werden, wohl aber für den ebenfalls bedrohten Hochlandsittich *Leptosittaca branickii*, der wahrscheinlich ähnliche Habitatsprüche aufweist wie der Gelbohrsittich. Besonderer Wert wurde auf die Zusammenarbeit mit der einheimischen Bevölkerung gelegt, die nun fast ausnahmslos über das Projekt informiert ist und die Schutzbemühungen unterstützt.

Schlagworte: Gelbohrsittich, *Ognorhynchus icterotis*, Department Tolima, Kolumbien, Feldforschungen.

Summary

After the sighting of a flock of Yellow-eared Parrots along the Central Cordillera in Colombia in October 1997 a field research project „Proyecto Ognorhynchus“ was started in June 1998 with the aim to relocate, research and protect this highly endangered parrot species. In the initial phase of the project no nesting record was possible, whereas another threatened species, the Golden-plumed Parakeet *Leptosittaca branickii* was found nesting in groups of dead Wax Palms *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, the same types of trees that could potentially be used by *O. icterotis* for nest sites. An additional environmental education program for the local campesino population was generated.

Key words: Yellow-eared Parrot, *Ognorhynchus icterotis*, department of Tolima, Colombia, field research.

1 Preliminary results

The Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* is an extremely rare parrot threatened with global extinction [2,3,4,5,6,9]. „Proyecto Ognorhynchus“ is an effort to both

study and protect this species within its last known location in Colombia along the Central Cordillera. The project was initiated through the management of PS, the advice of NK, and the fieldwork of BLL as an emergency response to the relocation of probably Colombia's last surviving flock of *icterotis* in October 1997. The project's dual aim is to research and protect the Yellow-eared Parrot. In general its objectives are to determine the ecological requirements and movements of the species in order to aid in its conservation. The species was observed in October 1997 by PS and a group of birders in an area approximately 50 km² within the department of Tolima on the slopes of the Central Cordillera of Colombia. Although *icterotis* has been recorded in this area historically [1,7] as well as several other locations in Colombia [2,5] the species has not been recorded in Colombia since 1989 despite continued searches [5]. The 1997 observations come from an estimated 50 km² area of montane forest patches intermixed with many dense stands of Wax Palms *Ceroxylon quindiuense*. This relatively large, albeit fragmented area of surviving natural habitat [4,5,7,8] appears ideal breeding and feeding habitat for *icterotis*, and provides some hope for a species that seems doomed to extinction.

Fieldwork began in June 1998, following a grant from ZOOLOGISCHE GESELLSCHAFT / FONDS FÜR BEDROHTE PAPAGEIEN, with the first phase lasting three months. During this period fieldwork concentrated on detecting the species, learning the study area, and assessing the local community's socio-cultural knowledge of the parrot.

Preliminary results indicated that the species was not nesting within the study area as was hoped following observations of a flock in 1997. It appears that the flock could be using the study area as a post-breeding feeding area, as it is strongly believed that *icterotis* is highly nomadic throughout its now highly fragmented and much diminished habitat. This emphasizes the need to widen the search area and undertake surveys throughout suitable areas in the species' Colombian range in order to detect other possible breeding areas or suitable habitat, which is very important due to the species' nomadic habits throughout its distribution [2,5]. In an effort to detect the species, transects were conducted over the entire study area, especially through large extensions of Wax Palms where confirmation was obtained that another threatened species, the Golden-plumed Parakeet *Leptosittaca branickii* [2,3] is locally common. This species was found nesting in groups of dead palms, the same types of trees that could potentially be used by *icterotis* for nesting, with the possible result that these species are competitors for nest sites [BLL, pers. obs]. In addition to intensive field searches for *icterotis*, it was of vital importance for the project to generate good relations between the project objectives and the local campesino population. Through casual conversations, use of the poster „Salvemos al Caripero” (used by the sister project for *icterotis* in Ecuador), and talks in schools, it can be estimated that today all inhabitants of the area know of the project and its objectives. Fortunately, the local communities fully support the project and, encouragingly, are very keen to assist in protecting the species. An environmental education program based around stopping hunting of the species is somewhat redundant since this has been prohibited and adhered to throughout the zone. Furthermore, few campesinos pay attention to parrots that are not maize eaters („no comedores de maiz”), testified by the inability to identify the relatively

common and vocal *L. branickii*. In conclusion to the preliminary phase, BLL has established that the project is fully viable, with the full approval and support of the community, for this project to continue monitoring and protecting *icterotis* in one of its last known enclaves.

The second principal phase of the project, to be undertaken between September 1998 until at least May 1999, will include: the continuation of the monitoring and detection of *icterotis*, as well as *L. branickii* in the initial study area; surveying all relict populations of Wax Palms existing in the department of Tolima and adjacent areas for possible signs of *icterotis* and *L. branickii*; continue community liaisons and environmental education campaigning; and the use of radio-tracking on juvenile *icterotis* leaving the nest. Ultimately, the project hopes to determine the limiting factors for the species, their interspecific relations with *L. branickii* whom they may be competing ecologically, and the determination of areas of primary importance to their survival for immediate protective measures. The culmination of the preliminary phase of Project Ognorhynchus was possible thanks to the funding support of ZOOLOGISCHE GESELLSCHAFT / FONDS FÜR BEDROHTE PAPAGEIEN. Additional thanks to SOCIEDAD ANTIOQUEÑA DE ORNITOLOGÍA for assisting the project. If anyone has unpublished information about the presence of this species in Colombia please contact one of the authors at their corresponding addresses (all references will be gratefully acknowledged). Further funds are currently sought for the continuation and completion of the next phase. Prospective donors should contact PS or NK for a list of the project's budget.

2 References

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